
Recent Developments in Special Libraries in Great Britain

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IT IS NOT KNOWN how many special libraries there are in Great Britain today. Most of the larger libraries—about one thousand of them—are members of Aslib, but they are probably outnumbered by the one-librarian information officer services of the smaller organizations. They certainly cover a vast range of subjects from oil to precious metals, and from wool to paper; but it may not be fully realized how specialized some of them have become. Recently a librarian who was being introduced as head of a library concerned with seaweed interrupted to say, “not seaweed in general—*brown* seaweed.”

There is no doubt that the Second World War acted as a stimulus to strengthening and enlarging existing libraries and to the creation of new ones. While great organizations such as Imperial Chemical Industries were expanding and developing their central and divisional library services, the Ministry of Works was establishing an extensive system of branch libraries throughout the country, and totally new libraries such as that of the Ministry of Food came into being. Since the war this trend has been accelerated by the following factors: (1) increased interest by both government and industry in research and development and, therefore, in special libraries. (The incentive to export more goods has helped.); (2) encouragement and financial aid from the Treasury through the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (D.S.I.R.); (3) the detailed examination carried out by the Royal Society of London of the whole machinery of obtaining, recording, and making available scientific and technical information; (4) increased efforts by Aslib to improve its services, enlarge its membership, and make itself heard in all matters relating to special libraries (For these and other purposes Aslib has secured a substantial grant

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through D.S.I.R. which has enabled it to increase both its staff and its publications.); (5) a purely voluntary tendency among all types of libraries—public, university, and special—to achieve a greater degree of cooperation among themselves.

By the end of the war, government officials, industrial executives, and research workers were all urging an inquiry into the state of the information services. Those who had visited the U.S.A. were impressed by the degree of importance achieved by the American special library and by the vast provision for libraries in such institutes as Massachusetts Institute of Technology and California Institute of Technology. There was a general feeling that Britain was lagging far behind, and that the recovery of the country might be delayed if nothing was done to remedy the position of the information services. To date, the government has had two committees in succession studying the problem, and one of the most important results of their work has been the decision that a new national scientific and technical library is needed as soon as possible. At the moment its functions are partially performed by the libraries of the Patent Office and the Science Museum, but it was the opinion of the committees that these libraries are overburdened by the double duty of serving the needs of their own institutions and those of the general public throughout the country.

Apart from this, there has been much consideration of service to industry, particularly to the small factories unable to maintain effective libraries of their own. For these the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research has established an extensive information service both from its own central organization and from its many research stations and affiliated bodies whose interests range from fire-fighting to building.

The work of the Royal Society is no less important. This ancient and august body, which numbers among its restricted membership some of the finest of the world's brains, decided as soon as peace had returned to inquire into the whole question of scientific information. The resulting volume, *Scientific Information Conference 1948: Report and Papers Submitted*,¹ including recommendations² adopted, is bulky but makes fascinating reading, for, like a Royal Commission, the Society called for evidence from many interested organizations and covered the whole field in workmanlike fashion. Immediate results included action on abstracts, periodicals, and reviewing.

The Society felt that the present arrangements concerning abstracts were inadequate and that there was unnecessary overlapping in some areas while other important fields were being unduly neglected. They,

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therefore, published a very useful list of abstracting journals, *A List of Periodicals and Bulletins Containing Abstracts Published in Great Britain*,³ and made various recommendations to the bodies concerned. The burden of obtaining permission to copy articles from the editors of periodicals and the dangers of copying without permission were fully recognized by the Society, which therefore approached a large number of scholarly journals directly and secured from most of them carte blanche permission for the copying of articles for the purpose of research.

In addition, the Society published a *List of British Scientific Publications Reporting Original Work or Critical Reviews*⁴ to aid research workers in their quest for the scant notices of new information and developments. The work of the Society has not ended here, and its impressive efforts on behalf of libraries and information services have been warmly appreciated by the whole profession.

The treasury-grants to Aslib during and since the war have been sufficiently substantial to make its program doubly effective. Its headquarters have been removed to larger and more convenient premises in South Kensington within a short distance of the Science Museum, and its publications policy has been intensified. To the well-known *Journal of Documentation* and the very useful little monthly newssheet, *Aslib Information*, has been added the quarterly *Aslib Proceedings*. The *Aslib Book-List* has been improved and a ten-year cumulative index prepared. One of the newest developments is Aslib's decision to record British doctoral dissertations and to publish a classified annual list under the editorship of P. D. Record of the Bodleian; the first issue is announced for publication this year. And at the present time Aslib has in active preparation a standard and comprehensive manual of special library practice. This year, too, by a special treasury-grant, Aslib appointed a consultant, C. E. C. Hewetson, to aid organizations in the establishment of new libraries and information services, to advise on the improvement and reorganization of existing services, and to undertake the study of special problems of technique.

In the international field special libraries have been active, taking special interest in the work of such organizations as Unesco, the International Federation of Library Associations, and the International Federation for Documentation, and sending representatives to their councils and conferences. Moreover, they have fully cooperated in the compilation of the third edition of the *World List of Scientific Periodicals*⁵ which has just been published.

Special tribute must be paid to the British Standards Institution

and J. F. Stanley, its librarian, who have been responsible for the translation into English of various parts of the Universal Decimal Classification and for organizing working parties on, and publishing standards for, such items as bibliographical references, microfilm storage, book measurements, standard format for periodicals, and alphabetical arrangement.

The trend toward greater cooperation between all types of libraries is exemplified by Sheffield, where the City Librarian, J. P. Lamb, organized the recording of the periodical holdings of all types of libraries throughout the area. The advantages to the smaller special libraries were immense, and the effectiveness of the Sheffield scheme can be gauged by the fact that it has been the model for schemes in other parts of the country.

One point which has become increasingly evident in recent years is the fact that many British public libraries include special library functions. For example, most British public libraries have extensive collections of material relating to the local history and archaeology of the surrounding area, while many of them go much further in the collection of books and periodicals, and other material on local industries—such as Nottingham on lace, Northampton on boot- and shoemaking, Westminster on entertainment and catering, and Hendon on aircraft industries. It is also becoming the habit for local organizations to deposit their libraries in the public library where they can be efficiently cared for, and where the public may secure access to them. Manchester Central Library, for instance, has over one hundred such libraries in its Special Collections Department.

With this awareness has come the urge to coordinate all types of special collections. At the Library Association, about three years ago, a working party consisting of representatives of all types of libraries, formulated a plan similar to the Farmington Plan for increasing the coverage of British and foreign material in existing subjects and the establishment of new collections and libraries where necessary. The scheme goes beyond the Farmington Plan in its inclusion of both serial and government publications from the start.

A notably interesting movement in recent years has been the increasing tendency of special libraries to organize themselves both regionally and by subject interests. The first move came from the medical libraries in London, which voluntarily arrived at an agreement to divide their subject field in order to achieve greater economy, the elimination of unnecessary duplication, and, at the same time, an in-

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crease in their total coverage. Under this scheme, for instance, the Royal College of Physicians now specializes in medical material published prior to 1850 (in which it is very rich). Aslib has been prompt to meet the demand by encouraging the establishment of several very lively subject groups—textiles, food and agriculture, fuel and power, economics, aeronautics, metallurgy, and possibly an engineering group—and also branches in the Midlands, in the North, and in Scotland. Some successful conferences by these organizations have already been held and have evidently fulfilled a real need. Independently of these, two other organizations have come into being. The government librarians have formed their own association under the title of The Circle of State Librarians and publish an informative newssheet, the *State Librarian*. And, in London there came into being the Standing Conference of Technological and Philosophical Libraries in London, which has recently published its own directory of libraries within its field. It seems probable that similar groupings will take place in such subjects as chemical engineering, oil, theatre and film, and plastics—all of which are strong in libraries and information services.

Parallel with this has been the movement for a new section in the Library Association, which culminated in the formation about two years ago of the Reference and Research Section with a surprisingly large commencing membership. At first it might appear that the number of associations and branches and sections is unnecessarily large, but there is active cooperation between them all, resulting in joint meetings, cooperative working parties, and much real cooperation in the everyday work of librarianship.

The position concerning the professional training of assistants in special libraries is unusually interesting at the moment. The only examining bodies are the Library Association and the University of London's School of Librarianship at University College, both of which include papers on special librarianship. The University of London provides a course for special libraries in its curricula which can be attended both by full-time postgraduate students and by assistants in active employment in libraries. Several of the schools of librarianship maintained by the technical institutes and colleges include courses in special librarianship, and the Association of Assistant Librarians (a section of the Library Association) gives help in these studies through its publications for students and in other ways.

Aslib itself offers no formal courses of training for the examinations in special librarianship, but it does hold regular junior and senior train-

ing courses (given by practicing experts) to which most of the important special libraries send their assistants. Aslib also publishes manuals and pamphlets to aid both librarians and students. There has been some question as to whether Aslib should take greater part both in the field of courses and in the establishment of its own diploma of efficiency in special librarianship, but there is much disagreement on this point, and a recent proposal for a revision of policy along these lines was decisively referred back for further study at an annual general meeting of Aslib.

In Britain the position of the special library within its own organization has always been the subject of much discussion. In some bodies the special library and its librarian are subordinated to the information officer (whose duties may include both internal and public relations and information). In others the duties of information officer and librarian are combined in the one person. Most librarians are agreed that a definition of the functions of each post would be helpful, and it is hoped that this will be provided by the government committees when their reports are published. This may help to clear up an unsatisfactory position, for in some organizations the present arrangement makes the position of librarian just one in a hierarchy, so that the librarian of today may be the branch manager or the research officer of tomorrow—a situation which definitely weakens the chances of maintaining a good service and which militates against the librarian taking a strong interest in the wider aspects of special librarianship.

Although Great Britain, in relation to its size, is probably the richest in libraries of all the countries of the world, there are still large subject fields—such as sports, handicrafts, biography, philosophy, etc.—which are either very weak in special library provision or which have no libraries whatsoever specializing on their material.

British librarians are keenly aware of this and of the many other problems which confront them. In their search for solutions there is much evidence that they carefully study American periodicals and books on professional subjects, and that they follow with great attention the work of both the Special Libraries Association and the American Library Association, as well as that of the American Documentation Institute and the activities of the French, Dutch, and Germans on such subjects as micro-reproduction.

Unfortunately there has not been nearly enough visiting between the librarians of each country, although representatives of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (Urquhart), the Royal

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Institute of International Affairs (Kyle, now Hon. Secretary of Aslib), and the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies (Drake)—to name only a few—have toured libraries in the United States since the war. Still closer cooperation between the U.S.A. and Great Britain would, in the opinion of this writer, be of great value to both countries, and it is notable that Aslib and the Special Libraries Association are now working on a promising scheme for the exchange of librarians between individual libraries on both sides of the Atlantic.

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